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Mental Hygiene Problems of Normal Adolescence

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“NORMAL Adolescence” is a combination of terms which may perhaps be considered contradictory. If by normal one means average and, at the same time, implies painless adolescence or adolescence without conflict, then certainly there is a contradiction. For the adolescence which occurs without stress and strain is too unusual to be called normal and if such were the usual thing, it would offer no problems of mental hygiene. What we are obliged to mean, therefore, are the mental hygiene problems that arise in practically all ordinary lives at adolescence, disregarding those extremes of mal-adjustment which seem to point towards serious mental breakdown.

If one thinks of human life as the continuous struggle of a segmental organism so to organize its various needs and interests with relation to a social and physical environment that it may go forward successfully, satisfying itself and winning social approval at the same time; if one conceives of life as the effort to strike a balance between a dynamic safety, attained by courageous intelligent action, and a static safety, which means regression and avoidance of action, and to substitute as far as intelligence permits, expression for repression, independence for dependence, objective for subjective, and concrete interests for dreams—then adolescence inevitably presents a crisis, a place where the struggle must necessarily be more aggressive and effortful if it is to result advantageously for the organism.

IDEAL ADJUSTMENT

The ideal of adjustment, which mental hygiene holds before us, might

be stated in this way. The organism is able to coördinate its own cravings in order that they may be expressed satisfactorily and objectively in ways socially approved. This implies that organisms use their intellect or intelligence in meeting the facts of every situation squarely and work out their satisfactions in terms of those facts. They use no indirect, evasive or subjective means to escape the problem of wresting biological success from the world of men and things as they actually are. In other words, the healthy adjustment is the scientific adjustment, which controls situations by mastering the facts in the case and manipulating them with intelligence and skill to carry out the ends of the individual. It is never to be forgotten that the most important situations which the human being has to meet are social and that the facts he has to understand and work with for the solution of his problems are social too. The way other human organisms behave is as important for him as his reactions to his physical environment. There is no moral reason why the organism may not use any control it can work out, but, as a matter of fact, no thorough-going control can be attained on any other than a realistic basis. All other methods are subjective and illusory and break under the strain of living.

If the mental hygiene goal for human beings is biological fulfilment, success, objective expression of the great human interests, independence—in short, full grown adult individuality which faces life in a positive, constructive manner—then we must examine adolescence to see wherein it presents

peculiar and unusual obstacles to all young people in the attainment of such an ideal. Why should life become more difficult at that point and hold so many possibilities of disaster?

Adolescence seems to be a crucial point which tests out the wholesomeness of the previous development. It is the point at which the individual takes on two selves. To adults around him, he is still a child, when they wish him to conform to their desires; when he fails to accept authority and brings down condemnation for his behavior, he is reproached by the adult in terms of his age and approaching manhood. "Jimmie is almost a man. Doesn't he know a man doesn't do that?" But when Jimmie asserts his independence he is quickly delivered back to the unfree state of childhood. Inside of Jimmie a similar conflict rages. At times, he feels himself a free, independent individual who can go forth courageously into the world, leaving the oppressive weight of family authority and interference behind him. But there are moments when he seems so helpless and alone in an uncharted country that nothing short of his mother's reassuring presence brings any relief. Whether Jimmie will be able to keep his face turned steadily, frankly, courageously toward the world of independence and responsibility and slowly but surely deprive himself of the comfortable protection of the family and maternal solicitude, depends upon everything that has gone into the making of Jimmie up to this point.

There are two lines of inquiry we should have to make to determine what Jimmie's chances are and what his problems are likely to be: first, as to the development of his work or play life; second, as to the development of his love and sex life. We want to know whether Jimmie has carried both

his work and love interests beyond the subjective, auto-erotic stage over into an objective fulfilment as far as his ability and environment have permitted.

DEVELOPMENT OF WORK OR PLAY LIFE

On the work side, is he occupied for the most part with realizing concretely his work, or if you wish, his play interests? If he wants a wagon, will he cry, or sulk, or have a tantrum until his father gives in? Will he steal a wagon? Will he brood over it, dream about the wonderful things he could do with it, but make no effort to secure it; or will he apply himself energetically to some plan for earning the money or building a wagon out of home-made materials? How difficult is it for Jimmie to put his desires into effective action? How difficult is it for him to get what he wants in terms of the facts as they are, without evasion, anti-social behavior, or substitution of day-dream fulfilment? Moreover, one must ask how interested is Jimmie in work and play. Has he a plentiful supply of interests and have most of these interests definite concrete ways of getting expressed? That is, has Jimmie both the "drives" and the developed techniques for realizing them? Whether or not he has, will depend not on Jimmie alone but on the entire background to which Jimmie's behavior has been a response.

If Jimmie has been under a strongly repressive discipline, if all of his attempts have been discouraged or subjected to ridicule, if environment has limited too greatly his opportunities, if health has prevented aggressive or effective action, if some inferiority, real or imagined, physical, mental or social, has developed a habit of non-aggressiveness, a fear of attacking a new project, a hesitancy to go over into

positive action, a tendency to evade responsibility because of fear of failure or exposure of weakness, then we may expect to find adolescence producing the most critical problems. A child who has grown up on the subjective plan, who has never learned to deal squarely with facts or to win approbation by legitimate efforts, or who has gone into compensatory activities of an anti-social or auto-erotic character, has been able to put off the results of such methods of meeting reality because of his childhood. The family, even the school or the foster family, will accept many such bad adjustments without realizing how serious they are, as a part of childhood. With adolescence, however, comes a point, when life looms up and even the family cannot continue to protect the child from his growing years. He must begin to get the come-back from his habits of poor adjustment. The patterns he has been using will not work in a world outside family protection. If he has not been accustomed to finding active concrete expression for his interests, the sudden flood of new energy, the widening of the horizon, the social impetus that youth receives, will swamp his motor apparatus. He has no techniques developed and has not the habit of trying to develop them for every new interest.

These vague but powerful forces coming in upon the old situation are difficult enough to harness into actual achievement, even with the best efforts of adolescence. They imply the subtle, elusive, complicated techniques of social relationships and community life, the creative expressions of art through techniques which take a life time to master—the complicated processes of all the various enterprises of an adult world. They involve not only difficult techniques, but the willingness to free one's self from the

economic support of the family and take on responsibility for one's own living. There comes a tremendous fear to many young people in the thought of economic independence, no money to fall back on unless one is able to earn it. Supposing one should lose his job! No father, with open pocket book, to help out, no comfortable home to drop into when work gets unpleasant! When that realization is suddenly forced upon the adolescent, there is often real terror behind it and it requires a genuinely healthy, courageous habit of meeting the problematic situations in life to make the adjustment without evasion.

A very unstable girl of eighteen who has been forced to work since she was fifteen because she has no family back of her, resists work and changes jobs frequently but is obsessed by fear as soon as she is without work. She has contemplated prostitution and has gone so far as to go with one or two men for the sake of an evening's entertainment. But her fear when she is not working is too great to allow her to depend on men friends completely, and she resists the loose living unless she has a good job. Her dislike of work, her fear of growing up are so great that the necessity for working has been registered almost as a compulsion. Needless to say she also fears adult sex life and is held back by that.

This particular girl, whom we shall call "Alice," illustrates the adolescent conflict when there is too great a pull-back, too many obstacles on the side of normal growth. Her early home life turned her against men and sex because her father was an abusive drunkard, unable to support the family. Her mother put all of her love and desire into the indulging and spoiling of her daughter. Alice was taught to dress above her station and feel herself better than others. She was the

petted, adored, only child. Then the mother died, leaving Alice to an unsympathetic, over-worked old grandmother, whom the girl has never ceased to blame for her lost childhood and its pleasures. Alice submitted but never accepted this change of living. She never ceased to long for her mother and the delights of adoration, dress and pleasure obtained without effort.

Then the grandmother died, leaving Alice without anyone, penniless and with not even a common school education. Inevitably, she went to work without skill or training, hating the grandmother and even her mother for dying and leaving her to such a fate. She had never developed the kind of initiative and persistence that would enable her to get education by night work. She was not strong. She craved pleasure; she blamed other people and fate for every misfortune. She developed an evasive way of meeting every unpleasantness, every failure of hers on a job. Now, she is often late to work, she resents correction childishly, she is unreliable, stays away if she has the slightest pain, wants a lot of attention, has no idea of business etiquette. When she loses a job, the employer or a fellow employe is to blame.

Adolescence increases the yearnings for a home, for a mother to fall back on. The only other outlet she can see leads to the pleasures which mean sex: cabaret, movie, dance hall. Alice is afraid of sex. She resists the idea of marriage. What does she want with children! Look how her mother suffered and in the end had herself and baby to support!

So Alice is caught with no developed interests, no techniques, nothing to stabilize or inhibit the regressive impulses. When one talks with her, one gets the full force of the adolescent

yearnings. She wants to be somebody, to do great things, to be superior. In her good moods, she is overwhelmed with dreams of accomplishment. She pines to use good English, to be a real lady. There is pathos in her inquiry as to what you say when a boy introduces you to his mother, and how you behave in a fashionable hotel dining room. Such questions have an importance that is almost greater to her than the problem of how to keep straight sexually. Winning of social approval is an ever-present burning desire, but she has no patterns, no habits, no control over the daily details of the process whereby this is gained. When one tries to place her in a good environment with girls of a better class, she reacts with a deepened sense of inferiority, expressed in more open, boastful wildness. She invents adventures with men to dazzle these virtuous, superior maidens. The craving for pleasures and something to make her forget increases.

What one would do, if it were possible, is to hold Alice long enough to see her through the learning of some skill or technique in which she could be really superior and by which she could earn a decent living. The difficulty is that owing to the amount of instability she has developed, it requires almost constant supervision just to keep her in one place physically, as well as to hold her to the daily effort of mastering a hard task. It also takes a great deal of money to float this project for which no guarantee of success can be held out.

It is not strange that youth finds it hard to buckle down to concrete accomplishment. The urge of life is so intense, the dreams so quick and glorious, the actual process so slow. Dorothy, a youngster who by temperament and every handicap of environment had learned to depend almost entirely upon day-dream fulfilment, found her-

self at seventeen facing the problem of earning a living. She had not one single worked-out process to make her useful to any human being. She was unstable, imaginative, impatient, undeveloped to the *n*th degree. It looked like a hopeless proposition. All the authorities predicted ultimate breakdown and failure. One faithful worker, however, took her into her own home, provided a stable background and concentrated all her efforts on holding the child to learning one technique by which she could become self-supporting. There were ups and downs: she ran away; she stayed out all night; she made living a stormy affair for her friends; she quarreled with every companion. She had to be held down to studying her lessons at night by the constant attention of an older person. Her course in stenography was interrupted by absences and bad behavior. In the end, the worker on the case triumphed. The child completed the course and took a job. She had developed a genuine skill. Although her work record for a long time consisted of one job after another in rapid succession, the fact that she knew how to do one thing well, always brought her back to working and its possibilities. The periods of keeping one job grew longer, the upsets less damaging to work. Friends held on. After three years, when some of the adolescent conflict had abated and the growing skill as stenographer had begun to have its effect, we find our unstable girl steadied down into a well-paid, reliable, worker whose emotional upsets are understood and adjusted by her without giving up work.

We have been following the development of the play and work interests of the individual and trying to show how a subjective, regressive development, or call it a lack of development, if you wish, leads to greatly heightened con-

flict at adolescence because of the increased pressure of internal as well as external forces.

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

On the side of the love interests, the development of social relationships which can be separated from the work side only arbitrarily, we find a similar situation. The individual whose love life and social interests have broadened progressively and have taken on a more and more objective character meets the effort required of adolescence to face adult sex and social responsibility with courage and positive striving. The individual who because of some inferiority, real or imagined, physical or mental, has tended to depend upon mother love or family tolerance, and has avoided the possible criticism of an outside world by shutting himself away from others and comparison with them, will easily find in adult love and hetero-sexual relationships, something too difficult to be faced. He will either desire to remain in the sheltered family situation, where he is loved no matter what he does or is and where as a child he can cling and depend and feel no responsibility for loving back again, or he will find in the world someone who will accept him on the same basis, and allow him to remain infantile or childish in his love needs.

Such a condition is, of course, often produced not by any essential weakness of the individual but by a combination of circumstances: an infantile or unsatisfied father or mother using the child in a selfish way to appease his or her own love needs, preventing it from growing away from the parental attachment as it normally should; the widow-hood of the mother forcing the boy to take the father's place and attaching his love for life; the handicap

of a long physical illness or extreme delicacy, reinforcing the ordinary resistance to going over from the certainty of mother love to the winning of hetero-sexual love under conditions of rivalry and possible defeat; the accident of circumstance which deprives the girl or boy of contact with the opposite sex at a time when the transfer of love interest is ready to be made and conditions him or her to homo-sexual or auto-erotic expression; the repression which puritanical adults, teachers, parents, schools, orphanages, put upon the normal hetero-sexual impulses of adolescence. When one contemplates all the influences that are at work to prevent the courageous objective development of love and sex, one wonders why adolescence ever follows a normal biological course.

Alice illustrates almost all of these influences. She is held back from maturity by the pull of childish cravings for mother love and protection. What she wants is not the objective adult love of one independent individual for another, but subjective satisfaction. She is not looking for the kind of man whom she can love with a real appreciation of his qualities and a sharing of his interests; she is looking for anyone who will give her the sense of security, the spoiling and indulgence the mother supplied. Alice seeks not a mate but someone to devour. She will consume her love object. She is not motivated by any dreams of home and children. Her hunger is for a pleasurable, care free existence in which she is responsible neither for work nor for love. Even on the physical side of sex, Alice has no desire for adult expression. She has all of the repressions which her mother's hatred of men, her father's behavior and conventional sex taboos could produce. Theoretically, she is as prudish as any carefully guarded

virtuous maiden, but her practice and her theory are as separate as the poles. Alice sins but she refuses to embrace her sin. Physical sex is a disgusting fact of life to which she yields because it buys the pleasures which are essential. Her conflict is none the less real for its inconsistency.

HOW TO MEET PROBLEMS OF ADOLESCENCE

What can we do practically to meet the complicated problems of adolescence? How can we lessen the struggle or lend strength to the forward looking interests and impulses? If we wait until adolescence has begun, we shall have a difficult task. But granting that most of the adjustments should have been made earlier and taking adolescence as we actually find it, what is possible?

We can surround youth with encouragement. There need be no sneering superiority, no ridicule, no tyrannical authority, no dogmatic overruling, nothing to undermine the confidence and assertion that are necessary to approach work and love on an adult basis. We can have young people as free as possible to develop their own interests, free to discover for themselves, to experiment, even to make mistakes. We can give them freedom to experiment in the ordering and control of their own group life as well as their individual interests.

We can recognize and supply the need of youth for interpretations of life, ethics, religions, philosophy, scientific and social theory, something general enough to be mastered verbally and used to reduce the chaos of a new world to a known and familiar thing: something to make life a safer, more manageable affair. Adolescence craves a unifying theory to use as a stepping stone from the safe limits of childhood

to a boundless universe otherwise too strange to be faced.

Parents and schools can see to it that youth is supplied with definite skills and techniques, that potential interests go over into action. They can show young people how to gain objective happiness in creative work. They can so equip adolescence that it will not be left defenseless in the face of an adult world with only dreams to offer. The family can reduce the pull-back of childhood by encouraging economic independence, breaking away from home, going away to college, widening the social interests to extend beyond the family circle. The parents can keep their love for the child objective and unselfish and welcome his growing independence and hetero-sexual interests.

Last and most important, if we are wise enough and grown up enough

ourselves, we can give the adolescent an interpretation of sex and human behavior which will enable him to face frankly his own cravings and inferiorities real or imagined and adjust to them in a positive, constructive spirit. Sex instruction as now provided in the public school is not equivalent to assisting youth to a happy emotional adjustment. Like Alice, one may know the facts of sex and hate them. Can we provide parents and teachers so well adjusted and understanding that they can take the adolescent at the critical moment and through their own courageous and positive attitudes show him the way, for not only does he need to face sex and learn to look forward to love and marriage, he needs even more to accept himself, honestly and frankly, to recognize inferiorities and abilities and learn the lesson of compensation!

The Behavior Problems of Atypical Children

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THE purpose of this article is to suggest certain practical methods of dealing with atypical children. In determining what is meant by an atypical child, we may approach a definition from the standpoint of certain physical and mental tests or we may reach a definition by a study of the child's career in the world thus far. The definition reached by the first process is as follows: An atypical child is one who upon examination is found to be seriously deficient in one or more of the abilities essential to social fitness. The definition reached by the second method is: An atypical child is one whose social reactions indicate that he is seriously deficient in that which ex-

perience shows is essential to social fitness.

For our purpose we shall follow Porteus and include in the term, social fitness, "earning capacity and learning capacity which contribute to self-support; temperament, disposition, judgment and common sense, which are factors in self-management, inhibitions of anti-social instincts and impulses which lead to self-control."

In our own work, we have given exhaustive physical and mental examinations and have paid careful attention to the social history of every child. The minimum staff required for the proper study of a child in our opinion is as follows: a competent social